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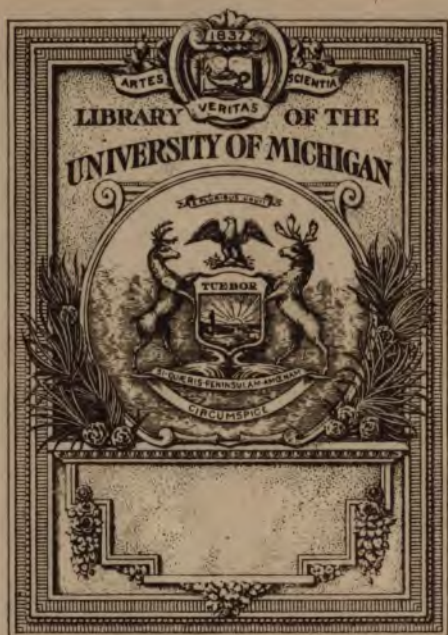
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## Some Letters



PORTRAIT BY SIR WILLIAM B. RICHMOND K.C.S., R.A.

*Robert Louis Stevenson*

Robert Louis Stevenson

Neuroscience, 1997, 81, 1111–1120

11-11-77





# Some Letters

By  
Robert Louis Stevenson

With an Introduction by  
Horace Townsend

New York  
**INGALLS KIMBALL**  
MCMII



# Introductory

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## SOME STEVENSON LETTERS

BY

HORACE TOWNSEND

**I**T has always seemed to me that, in order to escape the charge of literary ghoulism or body-snatching, those who give to the world excerpts from the correspondence of dead men should see to it that the letters are marked by characteristics negative as well as positive. Positively, they must throw light upon the literary methods of the writer, upon his relation to, and views upon, art, life or morals; negatively, they must not raise the veil upon those domestic privacies with which the outside world has no concern. I think the letters which are hereinafter presented for the first time in their practical integrity, fulfill

all of these conditions. They exhibit Stevenson in what must seem, even to those who knew him somewhat intimately, an unusual mental attitude, and throw an interesting side-light upon his artistic processes.

Stevenson was undoubtedly what is familiarly termed a "good correspondent." Despite his wretched health, which at times made the mere physical exertion of writing a positive pain to him, despite his constant struggle to keep abreast of his literary work, he found time and energy to keep alive a varied and a, not infrequently, exigent correspondence. As a rule his correspondents were either old and valued friends or fellow-workers in the literary field. It is perhaps to these latter, to Edmund Gosse, to Sidney Colvin, to William Archer and others of like standing in the world of letters, that we owe the more widely interesting portion of the "Collected Letters." But

the familiar touches in his home correspondence and the racy humor in his screeds to old Edinburgh friends are of very positive value. The correspondence that follows falls into neither of these divisions. Yet it is no less attractive on that account, for it suggests a scarcely recognized side of Stevenson's character. Mr. Trevor Haddon, to whom the letters are addressed, is now a member of the Royal Society of British Artists and a fashionable portrait painter. Twenty-three years ago, however, he was a young student, utterly unknown outside his own small circle and with all his worldly triumphs yet to come. He had not then obtained the Slade Scholarship, or any of the medals and other awards of merit dear to the student heart which were to become his later on. He was merely a "young fellow," as Stevenson calls him, just entering on life, full of boyish enthusiasm and



boyish philosophy. Yet when young Haddon, attracted by one of Stevenson's essays, wrote to the author, he not only received a gracious and friendly reply, but he laid the foundation of a desultory correspondence extending over several years. In the first of the letters to be preserved by Mr. Haddon, the tone has already become, if not exactly intimate, yet of a kindly, elder-brother-like nature which is altogether delightful. The letter lacks a date, as do most of the others, but it is addressed from 17 Heriot Row, Edinburgh, and was probably written soon after Stevenson's return from America with his newly-married wife. A phrase at the very outset gives us a clue to the reason so far as the novelist was concerned for this interchange of letters. "It seems to me," he says, "you are a pretty good young fellow, as young fellows go." So far so good, but to be merely a "good young fellow" would hardly have entitled

the youthful art student to the laying aside of his manuscript by so hard working a writer as Stevenson in order that time might be found to indite these closely lined pages of advice artistic, worldly and philosophical. Something more was needed, and we have it in the same sentence: "and if I add that you remind me of myself, you need not accuse me of retrospective vanity." There it is in a nutshell! The genial egotist was "reminded of himself," and nothing more was needed to set the pen in motion.

The second of the series is also addressed from Heriot Row, and is also undated. It is permeated with true Stevensonian didacticism, though how it was his correspondent's "fault" that the writer appears so "pulpiteering" does not appear. There are some true Stevenson touches notwithstanding. "Never be in a hurry anyhow," for instance; and also, "wishing . . . that you may long

be young," which sums up R. L. S.'s own practical philosophy in six words.

The correspondence now brings us to the beginning of that sojourn in the south of France which Stevenson referred to as the happiest time of his life. Just beginning to taste the sweetness of his draught of success, his spirits further stimulated by his pathetic hope of ultimate recovery, his light-hearted jesting, which, even in his darkest hours, was never far apart from him, pervades all of his letters at this time with a bubbling effervescence of cheery gaiety. One remembers his description\* of the "Campagne Defli," from which he dates the third letter of the Haddon correspondence:

"In a lovely valley between hills, part wooded, part white cliffs; . . . a

\* The Letters of Robert Louis Stevenson to his Family and Friends. Selected and Edited with notes and introduction by Sidney Colvin. New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1899, p. 295.

large, large olive-yard cultivated by a resident paysan, a well, a bereau, a good deal of rockery, a little pine shrubbery, a railway station in front, two lines of omnibus to Marseille.

“£48 per annum.

“It is called Campagne Defli! query, Campagne Debug? The Campagne Demosquito goes on here nightly, and is very deadly.”

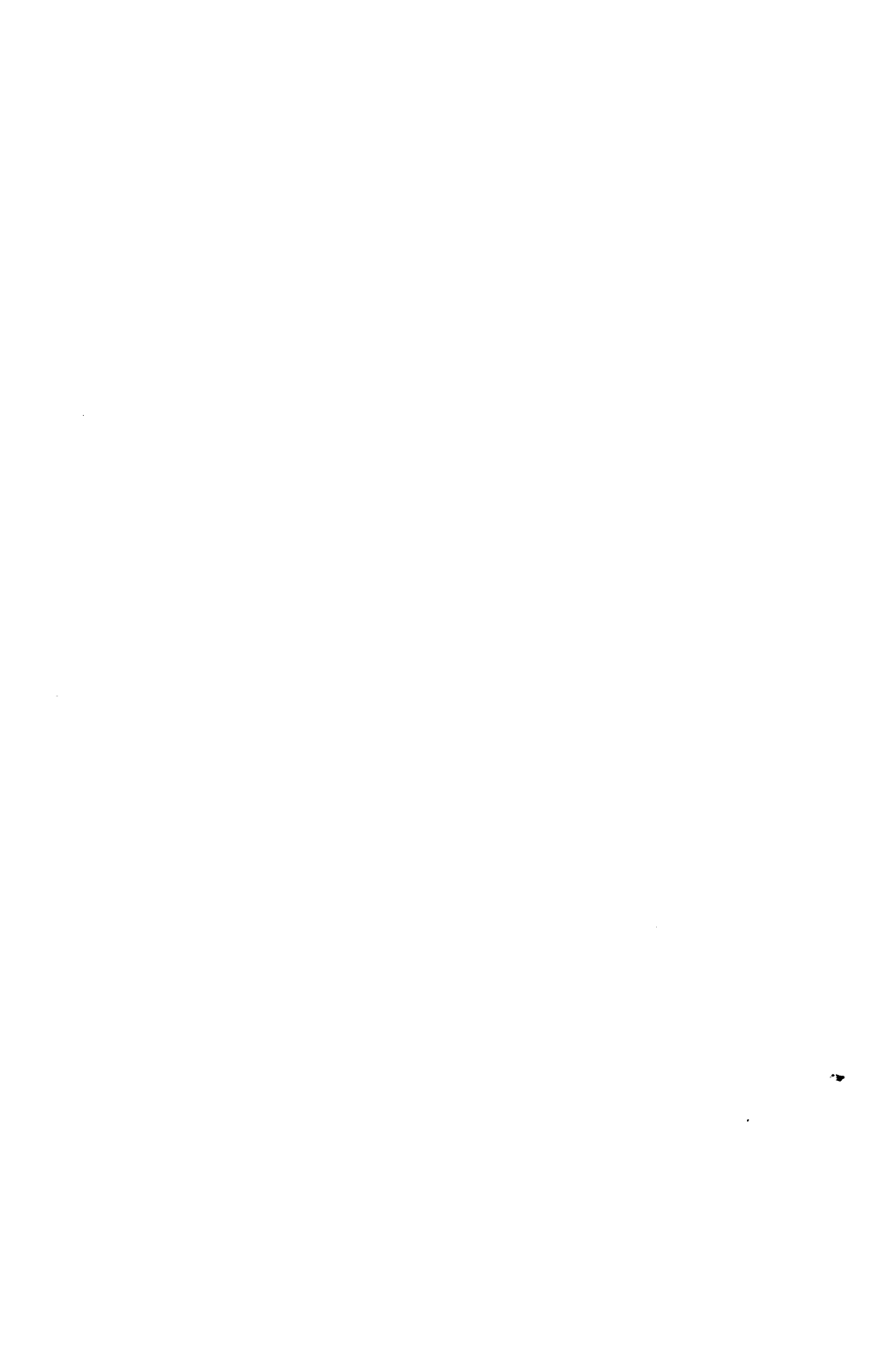
When Mr. Haddon next hears from him in July of 1883 he has moved to the “cramped but habitable cottage built in the Swiss manner, with a pleasant strip of garden, and a view and a situation hardly to be bettered.”\* He is in the plenitude of his creative powers; “Treasure Island” is to be published in the autumn of the same year, a year which is also to see the completion of “The Silverado Squatters,” “Prince Otto,” and “A Child’s Garden of

\* Vide “The Letters, etc.,” p. 291.

Verses." I attach peculiar value to this letter, for seldom, I think, has it been given to any artist to crystallize, as it were, the theories of his art in so compact a form as has Stevenson in this letter of brotherly advice to a craftsman in a kindred art. Some of these aphorisms might with advantage be written in letters of gold to find a place in every painter's and in every writer's workshop. The "patch of realism," the "glory in technical processes," how enlightening it is, as we consider Stevenson's own accomplishment! Once more, too, he sounds that favorite note which, like some strain half-heard but never wholly mute, ran through his life as through his work, "Cling to your youth."

And so we come to the last of the series. The exuberance of animal spirits is chastened. Hardly would one take the writing, large, almost scrawly, to be from the same hand which indited the characteristically neat and precise pages of the

earlier years. A touch of something like bitterness and disillusion creeps in at the close, but yet, partly blind and altogether suffering as he is, no hint of whining or complaining. "I wish I could read Treasure Island; I believe I should like it." Here for a flash is the old Stevenson, and in those final brave words, "You need not pity me. Pity sick children and the individual poor man," we lose our glimpse of those half dozen years which has shown us the man and the artist, not maybe through Mr. Balfour's sentimentally optimistic glasses, but happily unobscured by the smoky lens of Mr. W. E. Henley.



# The First Letter

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17 Heriot Row  
Edinburgh, (Undated.)

My dear Sir,

I see nothing "cheekie" in anything you have done. Your letters have naturally given me much pleasure, for it seems to me you are a pretty good young fellow, as young fellows go; and if I add that you remind me of myself, you need not accuse me of retrospective vanity.

You now know an address which will always find me; you might let me  
\* have your address in London; I do not promise anything—for I am always overworked in London—but I shall, if I can arrange it, try to see you.

I am afraid I am not so rigid on chastity: you are probably right in your view; but this seems to me a dilemma with two horns, the real curse of a man's life in our

state of society—and a woman's too, although, for many reasons, it appears somewhat differently with the enslaved sex.

By your "fate," I believe I meant your marriage, or that love at least which may befall any one of us at the shortest notice and overthrow the most settled habits and opinions. I call that your fate, because then, if not before, you can no longer hang back, but must stride out into life and act.

Believe me

Yours sincerely

Robert Louis Stevenson.

## **The Second Letter**



17 Heriot Row  
Edinburgh, June.

Dear Sir,

If I have in any way disquieted you, I believe you are justified in bidding me stand and deliver a remedy, if there be one : which is the point.

1st I am of your way of thinking: that a good deal of Whitman is as well taken once but 2d I quite believe that it is better to have everything brought before one in books. In that way, the problems reach us when we are cool, and not warped by the sophistries of an instant passion. Life itself presents its problems with a terrible directness and at the very hour when we are least able to judge calmly. Hence this Pisgah sight of all things, off the top of a book, is only a rational preparation for the ugly grips that must follow.

But 3d, no man can settle another's life for him. It is the test of the nature and courage of each that he shall decide it for himself. Each in turn must meet and beard the Sphynx. Some things however I may say—and you will treat them as things read in a book for you to accept or refuse as you shall see most fit.

Go not out of your way to make difficulties. Hang back from life while you are young. Shoulder no responsibilities. You do not know yet how far you can trust yourself—it will not be very far, or you are more fortunate than I am. If you can keep your sexual desires in order, be glad, be very glad. Some day, when you meet your fate, you will be free, and the better man. Don't make a boy and girl friendship that which it is not. . . .

Look at Burns: that is where amourettes conduct an average good man; and a tepid marriage is only a more selfish amourette—in the long run. Whatever you do, see that

you don't sacrifice a woman; that's where all imperfect loves conduct us. At the same time, if you can make it convenient to be chaste, for God's sake, avoid the primness of your virtue; hardness to a poor harlot is a sin lower than the ugliest unchastity.

Never be in a hurry anyhow.

There is my sermon.

Certainly, you cannot too earnestly go in for the Greek; and about any art, think last of what pays, first of what pleases. It is in that spirit only that an art can be made. Progress in art is made by learning to enjoy: that which seems a little dull at first, is found to contain the elements of pleasure more largely though more quietly commingled.

I return to my sermon for one more word: The natural desire to have a woman, gives you no right to any particular woman: that comes with love only, and don't be too ready to believe in love:





# The Third Letter



# The Fourth Letter



experience, and I desire all my friends to forgive me my sins of omission this while back. I only wish you were the only one to whom I owe a letter, or many letters.

But you see, at least, you had done nothing to offend me; and I dare say you will let me have a note from time to time, until we shall have another chance to meet.

Yours sincerely

Robert Louis Stevenson.

A. T. Haddon, Esq.

An excellent good new year to you, and many of them.

If you chance to see a paragraph in the papers describing my illness, and the "delicacies suitable to my invalid condition" cooked in copper, and the other ridiculous and revolting yarns, pray regard it as a spectral illusion, and pass by.

# The Fourth Letter



LA SOLITUDE  
HYÈRES-LES-PALMIERS  
VAR

but just now writing from  
Clermont-Ferrand

(July 5: 1883.)

Dear Mr Hadden,

Your note with its piece of excellent news duly reached me. I am delighted to hear of your success: selfishly so; for it is pleasant to see that one whom I suppose I may call an admirer is no fool. I wish you more and more prosperity, and to be devoted to your art. An art is the very gist of life; it grows with you; you will never weary of an art at which you fervently and superlatively labour. Superlatively; that is, think none of it than it deserves; be blind to its faults, as with a wife or a father; forget the world in a technical trifle. The world is very serious; art is the cure of that, and must be taken very lightly; but to take art lightly, you must first be stupidly foolishly in earnest over it



being, and for what age? how exactly the same faults and qualities  
at all; only a little duller, speedier and better tempered; a little less  
liberant of pain and some liberant of tension. We lost is a great thing for  
life but - query? - a bad endowment for art?

Another note for the artist

4. See the good in other people's work, it will never be yours. See the bad  
in your own, and don't say about it; it will be there always. Try to use your  
faults; at any rate use your knowledge of them, and don't run your head against  
stone walls. Art is not like theurgy; nothing is forced. You have not to  
repent the need. You have to repent only what you can repent with  
pleasure and effort, and the very best art that there is is the by technical  
excess.

Yours sincerely  
Robert Lewis Stevenson

La Solitude  
Hyères-Les-Palmiers  
Var  
but just now writing from  
Clermont-Ferrand.  
July 5 : 1883.

Dear Mr. Haddon,

Your note with its piece of excellent news duly reached me. I am delighted to hear of your success : selfishly so ; for it is pleasant to see that one whom I suppose I may call an admirer is no fool. I wish you more and more prosperity, and to be devoted to your art. An art is the very gist of life ; it grows with you ; you will never weary of an art at which you fervently and superstitiously labor. Superstitiously : I mean, think more of it than it deserves ; be blind to its faults, as with a wife or a father ; forget the world in a

technical trifle. The world is very serious; art is the cure of that, and must be taken very lightly; but to take art lightly, you must first be stupidly owlshly in earnest over it. When I made Casimir say "Tiens" at the end, I made a blunder. I thought it was what Casimir would have said and I put it down. As your question shows, it should have been left out. It was a "patch" of realism, and an anti-climax. Beware of realism; it is the devil; it is one of the means of art, and now they make it the end! And such is the farce of the age in which a man lives, that we all, even those of us who most detest it, sin by realism.

Notes for the student of any art.

1. Keep an intelligent eye upon all the others. It is only by doing so that you come to see what Art is: Art is the end common to them all, it is none of the points by which they differ.

2. In this age, beware of realism.

3. In your own art, bow your head over technique. Think of technique when you rise and when you go to bed. Forget purposes in the meanwhile ; get to love technical processes, to glory in technical successes ; get to see the world entirely through technical spectacles, to see it entirely in terms of what you can do. Then when you have anything to say, the language will be apt and copious.

My health is better.

I have no photograph just now ; but when I get one you shall have a copy. It will not be like me ; sometimes I turn out a capital, fresh bank clerk ; once I came out the image of Runjeet Singh ; again the treacherous sun has fixed me in the character of a travelling evangelist. It's quite a lottery ; but whatever the next venture proves to be, soldier, sailor, tinker, tailor, you shall have a proof. Reciprocate. The truth is I have no appearance ; a certain air of disreputability is the one

constant character that my face presents : the rest change like water. But still I am lean, and still disreputable.

Cling to your youth. It is an artistic stock in trade. Don't give in that you are aging, and you won't age. I have exactly the same faults and qualities still ; only a little duller, greedier and better tempered ; a little less tolerant of pain and more tolerant of tedium. The last is a great thing for life but—query?—a bad endowment for art ?

Another note for the art student.

4. See the good in other people's work ; it will never be yours. See the bad in your own, and don't cry about it ; it will be there always. Try to use your faults ; at any rate use your knowledge of them, and don't run your head against stone walls. Art is not like theology ; nothing is forced. You have not to represent the world. You have to represent only what you can represent with pleasure and effect,

and the only way to find out what that is  
is by technical exercise.

Yours sincerely

Robert Louis Stevenson.



# The Fifth Letter

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April 23rd, 1884.

Private.

Dear Mr. Haddon,

I am pleased to see your hand again, and, waiting my wife's return, to guess at some of the contents. For various things have befallen me of late. First, as you see, I had to change my hand; lastly I have fallen into a kind of blindness, and cannot read. This more inclines me for something to do, to answer your letter before I have read it, a safe plan familiar to diplomatists.

I gather from half shut eyes that you were a Skeltist; now seriously that is a good beginning; there is a deal of romance (cheap) in Skelt. Look at it well, and you will see much of Dickens. And even Skelt is better than conscientious, gray back-gardens, and conscientious, dull still lives. The great lack of art just now

is a spice of life and interest ; and I prefer galvanism to acquiescence in the grave. All do not ; 't is an affair of tastes ; and mine are young. Those who like death have their innings today with art that is like mahogany and horse-hair furniture, solid, true, serious and as dead as Cæsar. I wish I could read *Treasure Island* ; I believe I should like it. But work done, for the artist, is the Golden Goose killed ; you sell its feathers and lament the eggs. To-morrow the fresh woods !

I have been seriously ill, and do not pick up with that finality that I should like to see. I linger over and digest my convalescence like a favorite wine ; and what with blindness, green spectacles and seclusion, cut but a poor figure in the world.

I made out at the end that you were asking some advice—but what, my failing eyes refuse to inform me. I must keep a sheet for the answer ; and still Mrs. Stevenson delays, and still I have no resource

